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Abstract

This special issue explores whether the heuristics “macro” and “micro” capture the most important levels of explanation in the anthropology of education. Recent work suggests that we must move beyond a macro–micro approach. This introduction sketches reasons for going beyond macro and micro and reviews alternative approaches to explaining cultural and educational processes. The following articles illustrate such alternatives and develop their own arguments about macro, micro, and other relevant scales.

Keywords

timescales, agency, structure, language use, social theory

Disciplines

Anthropology | Education | Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education

Introduction to the Special Issue: Beyond Macro and Micro in the Linguistic Anthropology of Education

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Beyond Macro and Micro

This special issue explores whether the heuristics “macro” and “micro” capture the most important levels of explanation in the anthropology of education. Recent work suggests that we must move beyond a macro–micro approach. This introduction sketches reasons for going beyond macro and micro and reviews alternative approaches to explaining cultural and educational processes. The following articles illustrate such alternatives and develop their own arguments about macro, micro, and other relevant scales. [timescales, agency, structure, language use, social theory]

This special issue asks how we should explain phenomena studied by anthropologists of education—the production of groups through educational practices and ideologies, the legitimation of social interests through the definition and deployment of educational goals, the assignment of identities to students and their creative reworking of these identities, and so on. Should we posit “macro” structural and institutional processes that the phenomena exemplify? Should we instead explore “micro” actions and interactions that constitute the phenomena? Should we do both, arguing that macro processes constrain and micro processes constitute, simultaneously? Or have macro and micro outlived their usefulness as explanatory heuristics, such that we need to reconceptualize constraint and emergence?

Linguistic Anthropology of Education

The articles in this special issue address these questions from a particular disciplinary perspective, the “linguistic anthropology of education” (Wortham 2008; Wortham and Rymes 2003). Much anthropological work has focused on educational institutions—exploring, for example, how culture is produced through schooling and how social types are linked with conceptions of authoritative knowledge, in the form of language ideologies, models of “educated” and “uneducated” people, and the like (Erickson 2004; Jaffe 1999; Levinson et al. 1996). Linguistic anthropological approaches to language use, in particular, have enriched our accounts of educational processes (Cazden et al. 1972; Cook-Gumperz 1986; Wortham and Rymes 2003). Work at the intersection of linguistic anthropology and education has shown how educational institutions make important contributions to social, cultural, and linguistic processes that are of central concern to both linguistic and cultural anthropologists (Blommaert 2005; Collins and Blot 2003; Heller 1999). The linguistic anthropology of education thus brings together linguistic anthropological and educational research in ways that enrich both (Wortham 2008).

For decades, linguistic anthropology focused on the speech event as the focal unit of analysis (Hymes 1964). Some approaches studied typical speech events, describing how certain events recur among and characterize a group of speakers or social locations (Heath 1983; Philips 1983; Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). Others focused on the emergence of events over interactional time, as interlocutors enact sometimes-unexpected patterns (Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Erickson and Shultz 1982; Ochs et al. 1996). Both types of speech event-focused work fit a macro–micro paradigm, with typical events supporting generalizations about the macro and interactional work exemplifying the micro. More recently, however, linguistic anthropologists

have begun to look beyond the speech event, studying the cross-event chains or trajectories required to explain social identification, cultural change, and ontogenesis (Agha and Wortham 2005).

Contemporary linguistic anthropology of education nonetheless continues to use some insights developed by “micro” approaches, studying how signs come to have both referential and relational meaning as they are used in social and cultural context (Duranti 1997; Silverstein 1976). The meaning of any sign in use cannot be determined by decontextualized rules or structures, whether phonological, grammatical, cultural, or social, because any posited rules or regularities can be flouted in practice. An analyst must nonetheless attend to more than microlevel contexts of use, because the meaning of any sign cannot be understood without attending to more widely circulating, often institutionally anchored models of the social world. Linguistic anthropologists refer to an important set of these models as “language ideologies”—models of linguistic signs and the people who characteristically use them, which participants employ to understand the social relations that are signaled through language use (Schieffelin et al. 1998). As students of the “macro” have shown us, local contexts and interactions are not intelligible in themselves, because study of the local must presuppose broader ideologies and practices. Contemporary linguistic anthropologists of education thus continue to study both the macro and the micro, if by that we mean the regimentation of actions and events by larger-scale ideas, institutions and practices and the contingent emergence of unexpected patterns across interactional time. But we nonetheless argue that macro and micro do not suffice as analytic categories and that they can be misleading if they are adopted as fundamental heuristics for the anthropology of education.

“Agency” and Emergence, “Structure” and Constraint

Microanalysts' emphasis on the contingency of language use, on the sometimes-unexpected patterns that can emerge despite stable sociocultural practices and expectations, played an important role in overcoming earlier deterministic accounts (e.g., Bowles and Gintis 1975). Practices change and people develop new ways of understanding their experience, sometimes in minor and sometimes in far-reaching ways. To explain such change we must account for the emergence of unexpected models, behaviors, and ways of relating. As long as this insight about contingent emergence is not taken to mean that more extensive patterns have no coercive power, it is central to any adequate anthropology of education. But if we construe emergence as necessarily springing either from the "agency" of individual actors or from microlevel interactional improvisation, we misunderstand it. Unexpected patterns emerge at various scales and are not limited to individual actions or discrete events.

The concept of "agency" carries misleading presuppositions from the Enlightenment—assumptions about autonomous rational minds, about the individual as the relevant level of analysis for meaningful phenomena, about the dignity and the fundamental isolation of individuals. Using *agency* in this sense to explain the emergence of unexpected patterns is at best incomplete and often wrong. Individuals do sometimes develop their own plans for creating novel actions, and they sometimes put these into effect and thereby change larger social patterns—although such action is always mediated through collective artifacts. But contingent emergence is more often accomplished by groups. Sometimes this happens at the interactional level, when interlocutors create an unexpected response through improvisation (Schegloff 2007; Sawyer 2003). It can also happen among groups over longer scales, as when a family or a workgroup engages in what Shotter (1993) calls "joint action"—actions that cannot be reduced to the contributions or the intentions of any individual. These actions sometimes

occur within discrete events, but they also occur across events. A couple can work on a new form of relating, for example, over months or years, and the emergence of this new way of acting and understanding is not typically reducible either to the single action of an individual or to discrete, pivotal events. A team that includes both humans and tools can develop new forms of problem solving, such that analysts must attend to a system of individual dispositions and actions, together with nonhuman contributions, as the relevant level of analysis for explaining change (Latour 2005; Michel and Wortham 2009).

It is counterproductive to insist that all emergent patterns be reduced to individual actions or happenings in discrete events. Such reductionism is not a productive scientific strategy (Wimsatt 2000). Sometimes discrete actions and events are in fact crucial, of course. New forms of behaving and understanding can be accomplished in significant part by the seminal actions of individuals or within critical events. But not all change happens this way. Sometimes change emerges gradually across events, with coconstructed contributions, and sometimes with contributions that were not intended by anyone. In explaining contingent emergence in a particular case, we must figure out what level of analysis is appropriate for the phenomenon being explained. If we decide ahead of time that either individual agency or interactional creativity is the privileged level for explaining emergence, we will misconstrue cases that are better explained with reference to other scales.

Macroanalysts have shown that constraint plays as important a role in meaningful human experience as emergence. Silverstein (1992) and others have shown that microanalysis itself relies on assumptions about enduring patterns. Signs are polysemous, and disambiguation only occurs as participants presuppose more widely circulating models. An analysis that limits itself to the macro leads to determinism that cannot account for local and historical change, but an

analysis limited to the micro cannot even make sense of microlevel events. Individual actions, interactional patterns, ontogenetic and community trajectories are all constrained by processes at longer and broader temporal and spatial scales.

Just as microanalysts too often explain their core insight about emergence with reference to one homogeneous factor like “agency” or interactional creativity, however, macroanalysts too often explain their core insight about constraint with reference to “structure.” Where exactly does such structure reside? In the practices of capitalist exchange that have emerged over millennia and spread rapidly over the past few centuries? In the ideas and practices of European conquest and colonization that occurred over the second half of the past millennium? In the movement of people and ideas around the globe that has accelerated over the past few decades? In the emergence of new styles that take hold and pass away in a few years? In the adoption of a new approach that can take place over months or years in an organization or a family seeking systemic change?

Each of these can constrain. But they are quite heterogeneous practices and models, such that it does not make sense to envision them as one kind of thing that constrains in the same way. In fact, any process that takes place at a longer or more extensive scale can constrain processes at shorter scales (Lemke 2000). A novel understanding or usage that becomes established over a few seconds of interactional time can constrain the action of a subsequent speaker—even though we do not normally think of transient interactional accomplishments as “structure,” and certainly not as the same type of structure as enduring institutional or ideological constraints. Constraints can also emerge from local, less enduring patterns that mediate or even undermine more enduring regularities. An unusual way of organizing gender relations in a classroom, developed across months of interaction among teachers and students, for example, can constrain

participants' enactments and interpretations of individual identities while it nonetheless works against the typical gender relations more commonly found in the larger society (Wortham 2006).

Like *agency*, then, *structure* is a misleading term. Constraint is crucial to any adequate anthropology of education, but we should not imagine that it is a homogeneous process grounded in one "macro" level of explanation. Many different types of ideas and practices can constrain, in various ways. Constraints can support or undermine each other, and many different kinds can operate in any given case. Sometimes a crucial constraint is institutionalized in long-standing practices, but at other times institutions play no important role in establishing an effective constraint. Sometimes constraints are established by a small group and remain unrecognized or irrelevant to most people, but this does not change their power to limit choices and direct action among people influenced by it. Sometimes constraints are ephemeral, as in presuppositions that take hold then disappear quickly, instead of being based in long-standing ideas and practices. Instead of assuming that an analyst's favorite type of macro structure or institutional process normally plays the crucial role in constraining thought and action, we must investigate the types of constraint actually influencing our object of study in specific instances.

A narrow focus on micro or macro, agency or structure will thus fail to explain many phenomena in the anthropology of education. So will a simple combination of micro and macro. Many have proposed a "dialectic," a moving back and forth between the coercive force of macro processes and the creative potential of individual and collective action in particular events. According to such an account, enduring and extensive ideas and practices constrain events, while at the same time action in particular events either reproduces or helps to transform sociohistorical patterns. This position is often credited to Giddens (1976), who called it "structuration," but many others in sociology, anthropology, education and related fields have adopted a similar

position (e.g., Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000; Linger 2001). On such an account social action cannot occur unless people presuppose broader patterns that circulate beyond events, but these patterns have force only in particular events in which they are recontextualized and occasionally transformed. Contemporary linguistic anthropology of education agrees with this “macro–micro dialectic” account that both constraint and emergence are crucial, but it disagrees that “macro” and “micro” are the most useful categories for explaining how. Emergence and constraint can occur at various scales, in addition to or instead of the emergence accomplished in individual actions and interactional improvisation and the constraint accomplished by institutional “structure.”

Contemporary Movements beyond Macro and Micro

Various contemporary approaches to the social world have begun to move beyond macro and micro, while offering an account of both contingent emergence and enduring constraint. “Practice theory” criticizes macrolevel determinism, pointing out that widely circulating ideas and recurring actions can be transformed in practice and that we cannot know out of context what a “macro” pattern will mean for any individual or situation. Dorothy Holland and Jean Lave’s (2001) concept of “history in person” begins to describe how widely circulating patterns are contextualized in particular lives and events. They argue for the “mutually constitutive nature” of enduring social struggles, particular events and individuals’ actions. Instead of describing individuals and events as already formed and “affected by” or “creating” social categories and institutions, they study the constitution of selves, events, and institutions in practice. Practices are sociohistorically produced, but they are not merely derived from widely circulating models and institutional processes. Holland and Lave redescribe macro models and structures in terms of “enduring struggles” between and among people, groups, and institutions

to emphasize how they are contested and constituted in practice. Events and actions constitute and can transform these struggles, but such events and acts are always mediated by more widely circulating sociocultural patterns that are invoked in particular events. This goes beyond a “macro–micro dialectic” because of its emphasis on improvisational and contested “practice” as the leading edge of sociohistorical action and transformation. “Practice” overlaps both with enduring struggles and with particular events, as contestation in practices involves the production of both widely circulating and local categories and processes.

This strategy for moving beyond macro and micro can only succeed, however, if “practice” can be clearly defined. One sometimes hears the word invoked as if we knew the fundamental level at which social life operates—even though “practice” is used to describe widely differing timescales, from types of human activities that recur over decades (e.g., Taylor 1985), to sets of events involving a group of people that take place over months (e.g., Gregory 2001), to particular events that take place over an hour or less (e.g., Rampton 1999). “Practices” of the sort described by Taylor (1985), Gregory (2001), and Rampton (1999) certainly help explain many cultural and educational phenomena. But if “practice” is the arena in which widely circulating and more local components come together to produce the social world, we must know more precisely what it involves. Practice theory has the salutary effect of moving beyond two levels of explanation to explore processes through which resources are actually used in context to produce actions and relationships. “Practice,” however, is not one type of activity, naturally basic to the others. How, then, do we account for the various processes, beyond macro and micro, that might be relevant to explaining any given phenomenon in the anthropology of education? The movement beyond macro and micro begun by practice theory needs to be expanded.

Many social scientists used to conceive of a culture as a bounded set of people and

locations that contained relatively homogeneous beliefs and practices. Contemporary accounts speak instead of circulating signs, models, and practices heterogeneously distributed across space and time (Urban 2001). Agha (2007) provides a useful conceptualization. He argues that all cultural models that link signs with typifications of people and events have a “domain.” They are recognized only by a subset of any community, and this subset changes as signs and models move across space and time. There is no one “macro” set of models or ideologies, universal to a group. Instead, there are models that move across domains ranging from pairs, to local groups, all the way up to global language communities. In analyzing language and social life, we must describe various relevant resources—models drawn from different spatial and temporal scales—that facilitate a phenomenon of interest, and we must describe how models move across events (Agha 2007; Agha and Wortham 2005; Wortham 2005, 2006). Instead of focusing only on speech events, or simply connecting microlevel events to macrolevel structures, we must investigate heterogeneous domains and the various scales of social organization relevant to understanding meaningful social action.

One example of a domain would be the universe of people who recognize that the set of phonological regularities described as British “Received Pronunciation” are associated with a speaker of Standard British English, someone likely to be educated and of good breeding. A domain like this, of course, changes over time. Agha (2007) describes how the association between the phonological regularities now described as RP and a speaker of Standard English did not exist at the beginning of the 19th century, but were well established across much of England a century later. He argues that such change occurs through “speech chains,” a linked series of speech events in which the hearer in one event goes on to circulate a particular sign or model when speaking in a subsequent event. Hearing someone associate a given phonological

form with a model of educated, refined character, a hearer might presuppose the same association in his or her own subsequent speech. As more hearers and speakers do this, especially as such linkages are presented in mass media, the sign–identity linkage circulates more widely and persists over a longer timescale. Agha traces how readers of prescriptivist works that specified “correct” pronunciation in mid-19th-century Britain went on to write novels that circulated Received Pronunciation more widely as a model of social identity. Over historical time, as links between ways of pronouncing English and models of personhood traveled across many branching speech chains, a broader social domain was created as more people recognized the association between Received Pronunciation and personal characteristics like “educated,” “refined,” and so forth. Of course, many speakers of U.S. English are not part of the social domain that recognizes RP—to many of us, even less exalted British accents sound refined.

The concepts of social domain and speech chains show that the extent of cultural regularities are variable and that homogeneous speech communities and social structures are often misleading abstractions. Once we begin to examine the heterogeneity of cultures and how they change continuously, we see that macro and micro are abstracted away from a much larger set of what Lemke (2000) calls “timescales.” A timescale is the characteristic spatiotemporal envelope within which a process happens. The emergence and development of capitalism, a process that in some respects has taken millennia, and in other respects centuries (Postone 1993), is occurring across a very long timescale. In contrast, individuals develop their capacities and live their lives at ontogenetic timescales, across decades, drawing on but also developing sometimes-unique, embodied versions of more widely circulating models and categories. There are also “local” patterns, which can develop over days, months, and years. Teachers and students in a classroom over an academic year, for example, establish shared models and habits that draw

on but can be unique versions of more broadly circulating models and habits. To analyze identity development, socialization and other processes that often vary depending on their local site, one must recognize the contextualized models and habits that develop in a site over days and months. And events themselves take place at shorter timescales, taking minutes or hours and sometimes involving unpredictable “microgenetic” patterns. There are other timescales, around and between “social-historical,” “ontogenetic,” “local” and “microgenetic,” forming a continuum of timescales relevant for describing the human and natural worlds—ranging from processes that characteristically take fractions of a second to processes that take thousands of years.

Lemke (2000) argues that human semiotic processes are characterized by interdependence among processes at widely varying timescales. Many natural phenomena can be understood with reference to a focal timescale and the timescales immediately surrounding it, but complex human phenomena depend on processes from disparate timescales. Academic socialization, for instance, cannot be understood as a process happening at a single timescale—whether that is recurrent events characteristic of a culture at the social-historical timescale, or psychological properties of an individual emerging at an ontogenetic timescale (Wortham 2006). Academic socialization and social identification involve more widely recognized categories of identity circulating into local school and classroom contexts, local versions of these categories getting tied into the ontogenetic development of individuals as they are habitually applied to individual students, and all this happening in contingent events. To study socialization, we must focus on an ontogenetic timescale—tracing trajectories of events across days, months, and years. We cannot understand such an ontogenetic trajectory without attending to the contingent emergence of identity in particular events and to both widespread and local categories that help give shape both to events and to individual trajectories. We must understand events, trajectories,

social-historical and local categories, and their interrelations. The processes and phenomena studied by anthropologists of education thus emerge from interconnections among heterogeneous resources drawn from disparate scales (Latour 2005; Scollon and Scollon 2004).

To account for phenomena in the anthropology of education, then, we must attend to processes at various timescales, with different focal phenomena requiring attention to different configurations of scales. We cannot establish in advance which resources and scales will be relevant to explaining human phenomena, for two reasons. First, to explain complex phenomena like the production of educated people or the social identification of individuals or groups, analysts must attend to a configuration of interconnected processes across several timescales, not to one or two privileged scales. To focus on any one or two timescales alone would be to misconstrue the heterogeneous resources that make social identification and other processes possible. Second, relevant timescales will vary from phenomenon to phenomenon. We must expect that different types of emergence and constraint will be operating in different cases. Participants' sense of the unproblematic, "natural" establishment of social identity in a given case emerges from a contingent configuration of resources from heterogeneous scales.

Thus, we need to move beyond macro and micro. Despite the promise of contemporary work by Agha (2007), Dreier (2008), Latour (2005), Lemke (2000), and others, however, two challenges remain. First, we have not fully articulated how processes and resources from heterogeneous scales work together to explain both change and stability. Various approaches have been proposed, and it is not yet clear which will be appropriate for the anthropology of education and other fields. Second, some are concerned that this new approach fails to capture the real effects of institutional structures that have been described as "macro" in earlier work. This special issue brings together voices from across contemporary linguistic anthropology of

education to explore these issues. Together, the articles open up a crucial issue for further debate.

The Articles

In his article, Michael Lempert moves beyond attempts to combine micro, macro and intermediate scales, arguing that we should not presuppose stable processes at identifiable scales as the foundation of our account, because this can obscure the way actors and actants produce scale. Actors or groups themselves sometimes strategically foreground particular scales as part of ongoing activities and institutional projects—a point also made by Collins. At other times, scale tacitly becomes relevant as actors draw on various resources and design interaction rituals. Lempert argues that we should study “scaling practices” through which scale is made relevant and socially consequential. His empirical analysis focuses on debate among Tibetan Buddhist monks in India. Most of us conceive of Buddhist monks as gentle and imagine that Buddhist monasteries must be quiet, peaceful places. But Lempert describes debates in which monks engage in almost violent arguments. His analysis shows that apparently discrete events of debate cannot be isolated from resources at other scales, and that what Goffman called “the interaction order” is an accomplishment and not a metaphysical prime. To illustrate how scale is an accomplishment, he also shows that Buddhist debate has been caught up in a process of subject formation and “rescaled,” in the sense that reform-minded Tibetan Buddhists have promoted debate as a way to inculcate dispositions appropriate for a people in exile. Through this case, Lempert argues that the relevant scale for analysis is an empirical question, as well as an accomplishment for participants.

Bucholtz, Barnwell, Lee, and Skapoulli document the emergence of one student’s classroom identity across weeks in a college science class. They show how event-level analysis alone, although crucial to an overall account, cannot explain the creation and development of a

student's identity that occurs through linked events across several class sessions. They thus complicate the micro–macro dichotomy by demonstrating the crucial role of local, cross-event speech chains that cannot be reduced to one pole or the other. Their empirical analyses attend closely to how students' interactional positions emerge within speech events. But they then show how, across a series of events in which the focal student was socially identified, interactional presuppositions gained cumulative force across time. Certain presuppositions about the focal student are less fluid in some events and more fluid in others, but they become more sedimented over time. The authors also show how widely circulating expectations about gender and science can be undermined in local contexts, as they trace the emerging local identity of an incompetent male science student who needs to be supported by his female lab partners.

Warriner argues that advocates of micro and macro make important points: they document the importance of emergence and constraint, and they make these crucial aspects of social life available to anthropologists of education. But she also argues that an unreflective emphasis on micro and macro, as if the meaning and relevance of these terms were obvious, has too often kept us from appreciating complex multiscale realities. As an alternative, she develops an account of “practice” and illustrates it with a study of refugee learners of English in the United States. She explores the role of language ideologies in shaping refugee women's conceptions of themselves and their new home, as well as host perceptions of the refugees and their status as people, language learners, and potential citizens—in a time of accelerated migration and a national context of aggressive monolingualism. Through analyses of refugee women's narratives she shows how language ideologies are not simply macrolevel beliefs, but are instead more complex amalgams of global and local processes. She analyzes how refugee women creatively deploy English by drawing on and contributing to processes at various

timescales, thus positioning themselves as language learners and potential citizens.

Collins presents scenes from an indigenous Mexican family's home and school learning experiences, now that they are immigrants to upstate New York. He describes how the children interact with teachers, siblings, peers, and ethnographers, tracing emergent patterns in specific interactions. He places these interactions in various contexts, including the differing tendencies of individual teachers, who have divergent attitudes toward other languages and thus foster different activities in their classrooms—differences that in turn afford different opportunities to two sisters and assign them different identities as language users and students. Collins also describes how these interactions and local settings are partly organized by global processes of stratification and large-scale ideologies of nation and language. His article describes how processes at global scales constrain more local events, arguing that we must not overlook the importance of sedimented, coercive national and global processes that reproduce and sometimes increase inequality. But he does not posit “macro” scales as naturally and eternally central to all social processes. Instead, he relates large-scale processes to the more local scales that they are mediated through. And he argues that, instead of one scale or another always being relevant, scale becomes relevant as people themselves construct certain scales as focal for a given phenomenon. He warns against “constructivist” tendencies to ignore the macro, but he does not simply return to macrolevel determinism.

Rymes traces the recontextualization of popular cultural forms as they are transformed across YouTube productions. She analyzes the song “Crank That,” describing how elements of the song and dance have changed across productions, as others create hybrid performances that mix original elements with new ones that fit different contexts and draw on different repertoires. She offers a similar analysis of how Barack Obama's “Yes we can” was transformed across

YouTube renderings produced by different groups. Rymes uses these analyses to make two arguments. First, she argues that cultural critics who lament the mesmerizing, commodifying nature of popular culture fail to recognize the creative recontextualizations that always accompany such cultural forms. Second, she argues that this process of recontextualization—and the related concept of repertoires within which recontextualizations take hold—offer a productive way to move beyond the macro–micro heuristic.

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